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ABSTRACT

Barriers to progress in educational reform exist inside and outside the education system. Some arise where new practices encounter traditional expectations and boundaries, but others go much deeper than education, such as poverty, racism, local political conflicts, and human resistance to change. The following five categories of barriers are particularly prevalent and significant among the vanguard schools and districts in this study: (1) lack of clear direction; (2) weak incentives for change; (3) regulatory and compliance mentality; (4) limited learning opportunities for educators; and (5) poor communication. Governors can use their roles as leaders to help overcome these barriers by promoting goals that support high performance and access to resources. Like schools, state education systems cannot be reformed overnight, but progress to date, documented by several case studies, indicates that systems can move forward. The work of vanguard schools, leaders in educational reform, is explored. (Contains 10 references.) (SLD)

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TRANSFORMING EDUCATION

Overcoming

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Transforming Education: Overcoming Barriers

Jane L. David and Paul D. Goren

Since their initial meeting in 1908 to discuss interstate water problems, the Governors have worked through the National Governors' Association to deal collectively with issues of public policy and governance. The association's ongoing mission is to support the work of the Governors by providing a bipartisan forum to help shape and implement national policy and to solve state problems.

The members of the National Governors' Association are the Governors of the fifty states, the territories of American Samoa, Guam, and the Virgin Islands, and the commonwealths of the Northern Mariana Islands and Puerto Rico. The association has a nine-member Executive Committee, a Task Force on State Management, and three standing committees—on Economic Development and Commerce, Human Resources, and Natural Resources. Through NGA's committees, the Governors examine and develop policy and address key state and national issues. Special task forces often are created to focus gubernatorial attention on federal legislation or on state-level issues.

The association works closely with the administration and Congress on state-federal policy issues through its offices in the Hall of the States in Washington, D.C. The association serves as a vehicle for sharing knowledge of innovative programs among the states and provides technical assistance and consultant services to Governors on a wide range of management and policy issues.

The Center for Policy Research is the research and development arm of NGA. The center is a vehicle for sharing knowledge about innovative state activities, exploring the impact of federal initiatives on state government, and providing technical assistance to states. The center works in a number of policy fields, including agriculture and rural development, economic development, education, energy and environment, health, information management, social services, trade, training and employment, and transportation. The priorities for the association's research are set by the Governors.

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Jane L. David

Paul D. Goren

FOREWORD

American education is at a turning point. Since the publishing of *A Nation at Risk* in 1983, the leadership of the nation's Governors has led to the development of the National Education Goals and a commitment to restructure American education by the year 2000.

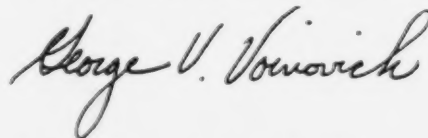
No one said transforming education into a performance-based system would be an easy task. Although improving education is a national imperative, it remains a state and local responsibility. States establish the framework within which local schools and districts function. Many states are actively involved in bringing about the necessary changes. Each is challenged by trying to create a new system, while at the same time operating under the existing, inadequate system. Each is also challenged to help educators and the public understand what new standards mean and the ways that teaching and learning must change in order for all students to reach those standards.

This report, *Transforming Education: Overcoming Barriers*, provides an in-depth examination of efforts to restructure the country's education system and the barriers that are encountered. It offers policymakers, educators, and citizens the opportunity to understand the changes taking place and to focus on where midcourse improvements and corrections might be necessary. Its findings stress the need for establishing intensified professional development for educators and consistent signals for change in policies and regulations, as well as addressing the multiple needs of children.

Improving our educational system is essential to the economic prosperity of this country. We must ensure that all our students have the skills and knowledge to compete in a world economy and actively participate in a democracy. A society that does not value the education of its citizens cannot secure its future. The challenge for Governors is to continue their strong leadership to sustain support for systemic reform as the transition is made from the old system to the new.



Governor Roy Romer, Colorado
Chair, National Governors' Association
Co-Chair, NGA Task Force on Education



Governor George V. Voinovich, Ohio
Co-Chair, NGA Task Force on Education

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Expectations for systemic reform are high among policymakers and business leaders. With the passage of time, however, experiences in schools, districts, and state agencies suggest how difficult it will be to meet these expectations.

Creating the policy environment that underlies systemic reform is proving more difficult than anticipated. It is easier to add new policies than subtract old ones. It is easier to mandate than enable. It is easier to monitor than assist.

It is taking more time and more support for schools and districts to restructure than expected. Teaching for understanding, managing for results, and leading organizational change are far more difficult than traditional practice.

Barriers to progress exist inside and outside the education system. Barriers arise where new practices encounter traditional expectations and boundaries. Other barriers go much deeper than education—poverty, racism, local political conflicts, and human resistance to change.

Five categories of barriers are particularly prevalent and significant among the vanguard schools and districts in this study.

Lack of clear direction. Educators and students get mixed signals about what matters as new curricula and assessments are layered on top of old.

Weak incentives for change. Incentives for educators and students to change are weak, especially in schools and systems coping with increasingly severe problems of poverty and racial conflict.

Regulatory and compliance mentality. Many existing local, state, and federal regulations, including union contracts, reinforce traditional goals, practices, and measurement, and focus on procedures rather than results.

Limited learning opportunities for educators. There are few meaningful opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn new ways of teaching, organizing schools, and supporting change.

Poor communication. There is little exchange across levels of the education system, within schools, and between schools and their communities.

To overcome these barriers, Governors must continue their role as leaders in education reform. They must continue to promote goals and policies aligned to support high performance and access to resources for all students, schools, and school systems.

Governors can use their position in important ways to:

Send clear and consistent signals.

Give priority to professional development.

Balance top-down and bottom-up strategies,

Create feedback mechanisms for policymakers,

Make mid-course corrections, and

Focus attention on education as a public good.

Like schools, state education systems cannot be transformed overnight. With sustained leadership and attention, however, progress to date suggests that systems can continue to move forward. Although progress is not easy to measure in schools or systems, conflicts around traditional boundaries signal that deep changes are underway.

Governors, in cooperation with other state and national leaders, must play an even more critical role to keep systemic reform on track. Conflicts will continue to rise to the surface, reflecting genuine differences in access to resources and beliefs about education. Leadership that focuses the public's energy on the ultimate goals of education and its essential role in preserving our democracy will be the critical underpinning to continued improvement.

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION: OVERCOMING BARRIERS

Four years ago, the Governors committed themselves to a decade of sustained effort to achieve the National Education Goals. Across the nation, states are taking steps to transform their education systems to meet the needs of the twenty-first century. Some steps are small, some are giant. Some steps are planned but not taken, as economic conditions impede progress and leaders are replaced by those with different agendas.

To keep Governors abreast of progress and pitfalls, the National Governors' Association (NGA) has tracked the restructuring agenda since its inception in the late 1980s through case studies of reform efforts. The first report, *Restructuring in Progress: Lessons from Pioneering Districts*, provided an early look at what restructuring schools and districts were doing. The second NGA report, *State Actions to Restructure Schools: First Steps*, investigated some of the earliest state policies to transform education. Each case revealed progress in changing parts of the system and together represented a significant beginning to the daunting task of changing the entire system.

This report examines why progress seems to lag behind early expectations for reform. The focus of the study is to identify and better understand major barriers to progress and the actions policymakers can take to overcome them. The research team selected states and districts reputed to be leaders in reform, believing barriers would be most evident where traditional practices and beliefs are most challenged.

Understanding barriers to progress requires multiple perspectives, from those inside schools whose actions most directly affect students during the school day to those who make policy. Because policies often have unintended results and encounter unexpected barriers as they wend their way through the layers of the system, first-hand accounts are the best way to track their influence and inform policymakers.

Interviews began with teachers, site administrators, and students to hear first-hand what they are trying to do differently and what helps and hinders their attempts to transform teaching and learning. Interviews with parents and business leaders explored their understanding of and support for restructuring schools and districts. In districts, interviews with superintendents, central office staff, school board members, and union leaders focused on how their roles and organizations are changing and what stands in the way. Interviews with Governors' staff, chief state school officers, state department of education staff, and legislative staff examined how state agencies are reorganizing to lead and support transformation at all levels of the education system.

Two researchers visited five states between January 1992 and May 1993. During the 1992-93 school year, researchers visited California, Indiana, and Ohio. Preliminary work in early 1992 was based on visits to Kentucky and Washington. In the fall of 1992 in Indianapolis, NGA convened a group of policymakers, policy analysts, and practitioners from across the country. Their combined expertise helped shape the study and provided data from a larger base of states and districts.

Signs of Progress

Transforming public education to ensure that all students have the opportunity to achieve high performance standards is an enormously complex agenda for which there is no prior experience or road map. It affects ingrained practices across state government as well as inside schools and districts—practices supported by deeply held beliefs in local communities.

Given the unprecedented nature and complexity of this undertaking, there are no clear milestones against which to assess progress. The absence of a fully developed system of standards and assessments, and fewer than expected resources to support change, make judging progress even more problematic. With much of the guidance and support systems, as well as standards and assessments, still in their formative stages, it is not yet possible to judge progress based on student performance.

Yet it is not too soon to ask whether there are signs that the system is moving forward, especially in laying the groundwork for systemic reform. Studying the barriers to transforming education is one way to illuminate where change is occurring. **Barriers arise where new practices encounter traditional expectations and boundaries.**

Progress in Vanguard Schools

Some of the more than thirty schools visited in the five states have created significantly different learning environments for students, while others have made only marginal changes. Although no two schools are changing their organizations in the same way, their faculties share beliefs in the importance of teaching for understanding and learning by doing. In vanguard schools, students are more likely to be involved in complex multi-day projects that entail applying knowledge from several subject areas and more hands-on activities, from science experiments to video production. Students are more likely to have opportunities to work in teams, to teach each other, to express and discuss ideas and interpretations, and to demonstrate knowledge to peers and teachers through products and performances.

In these schools, boundaries between grade levels that divide students strictly by age are beginning to vanish. Similarly, rigid tracking and ability grouping are slowly being replaced by more temporary and flexible ways of grouping students for different purposes based on multiple criteria. Boundaries between teachers, who typically are isolated in individual classrooms, are breaking down as teachers work in teams and plan together.

Schools with the most changes in teaching and learning have several characteristics in common. They tend to have access to outside resources, usually public or private grants and consultants, to support time and opportunities for teachers to learn and work together. They have principals who are committed to improvement, to faculty participation in the process, and to providing leadership and support to their staff.

**Teaching and Learning Together:
Blue Sky Elementary**

It is recess time at Blue Sky Elementary, located in a small, almost rural town. Yet in one classroom seven pairs of students are huddled head to head across desks. One partner is a fifth grade volunteer and the other is a younger student with learning disabilities. The fourth and fifth graders have had a week of training with the special education teacher on helping their pupils with reading and spelling. Their skills in teaching and giving encouragement and positive feedback are impressive.

This scene typifies the atmosphere and philosophy of Blue Sky. Its 600 students, one-third of whom are poor, and twenty-three classroom teachers, most of whom have chosen to teach here, have created a center of learning and collaboration for adults and children. With several years of practice, students and teachers are experts in team learning and integrated subject areas. Teachers are in self-selected peer support groups with time for planning together and opportunities for peer coaching. An innovative physical education schedule provides extra planning and learning time for teachers. In the gym, students are racing to the number on the wall that equals "7 + 4." The physical education teacher meets regularly with teaching teams in order to incorporate appropriate skills into the physical exercises.

Teachers worry that Chapter 1 students will miss class activities if they are pulled out. So students have intensive work on reading and basic skills before school, thanks to a creative bus schedule and extra help from Chapter 1 teachers in their regular classrooms. Similarly, special education students remain in regular classrooms with support from specialists. Even a potentially disruptive student, who requires full-time one-on-one assistance, works quietly with his teacher throughout the day in the back of the classroom.

A focus on learning, a spirit of shared responsibility, and respect for cultural and individual differences permeate the school. Yet this did not happen overnight. The principal quietly encourages teachers to explore alternatives by seeding ideas, distributing research articles, and stimulating discussion and experimentation. Parents are welcomed with open arms and are involved in all aspects of the school; the principal tries to visit those who are not likely to come to the school.

By seeking grant monies and waivers, especially from subject-specific state learning objectives, teachers have the freedom to create curriculum and participate each year in intensive professional development both inside and outside the school. Teachers are conducting their own research to determine how well basic skills are learned when embedded in cross-disciplinary, project-based activities. They are also developing new ways to assess learning. In the meantime, however, their students perform well on state-required standardized tests.

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**Building on Diversity:
Belle View Elementary**

Driving up to Belle View Elementary in the inner city of a large urban district, one sees few external signs that the school is on the cutting edge of reform. Inside the school are 950 children from all over the world; only 25 percent speak English and even fewer live in households with incomes above the poverty level. In classrooms throughout the school, one can hear the students speaking Spanish, Vietnamese, Hmong, Lao, and English. Teachers, teacher assistants, and community members have created an innovative instructional program that groups students for part of the day by English proficiency rather than age. The instructional program is linked to a performance assessment system, created by faculty and staff, that includes an electronic portfolio for each child.

Five years ago, the story was very different. Student performance was uniformly low, and teachers were fed up with having 75 percent of the students pulled out of their classrooms every day for English-as-a-Second-Language instruction. A new principal arrived. A dynamic instructional leader and a specialist in language acquisition, she pushed the staff to look at student data and their feelings about the school's program. She then challenged them to work together to design a school that would meet the needs of the diverse community it serves.

An intensive push began to create a unique schoolwide program combining language and content instruction with native language support. Through a consensus process, the faculty developed a complicated but workable schedule that regroups students throughout the day and provides planning time for teachers. Planning time lets teachers continue to develop expected student outcomes in each subject and criteria for assessment.

In the morning, students are grouped for content instruction in one of six levels of English proficiency to ensure that even those least proficient have access to rich content in every core subject area. The groups are extremely fluid. Students change groups as soon as their language proficiency improves, which is judged by a team of teachers who apply staff-developed criteria to students' portfolios. Special instructors, fluent in the students' native languages, work alongside teachers in the morning, effectively bridging the language and culture gap between teachers and children. The goal is for all students to master the curriculum and communicate in English.

In the afternoon, students regroup into age-based heterogeneous classes balanced by race, ethnicity, gender, and language proficiency. Every ten weeks, students enroll in two classes specially designed by Belle View faculty.

The principal taps every available source to support the school's efforts; faculty have successfully obtained assistance and grants from foundations and the state department of education.

These schools also have teachers who feel overwhelmed and exhausted, especially in the face of high proportions of at-risk students whose needs extend well beyond the academic program. Progress is slowed and morale weakened by repeated budget cuts, high turnover among school and district leaders, divisive school-board politics, and little political support for investing in professional development. Urban districts in the study sample are facing increasing enrollment and declining budgets each year. Even Kentucky, which initially saw a considerable increase in funding, has less revenue than expected, reducing support for school improvement.

Leading-edge schools are precursors to the progress that is possible across the system. They demonstrate how much time, effort, and help is required. Although the number of vanguard schools remains small, they have the potential to increase as more systemwide changes occur in districts and states. **More troubling than their small number is that schools able to significantly transform their academic programs tend to be those in suburban neighborhoods, not those preoccupied with issues of race and poverty.** There are vanguard schools in minority and poor neighborhoods that show striking successes in reductions of violence and racial tensions. But it will take considerable time, effort, and support to sustain these successes and simultaneously strengthen the academic program.

Shifting Boundaries Beyond Schools

The number of remarkably transformed schools remains small, yet there are indications outside of schools that major shifts are occurring. These shifts are most visible around boundaries that have traditionally separated people and parts of the system. Conflicts often arise at these boundaries—a clear sign that change is occurring.

Boundaries between schools and their communities are shifting. Parents are assuming new roles on school-site decisionmaking councils. Schools are becoming the gateway, and even the locus, for a range of services including health and social supports, preschool programs for children, and night school for adults.

New organizational entities—housed inside or affiliated with districts—illustrate new relationships between districts and the larger community. For example, in two urban districts, local foundations have established professional development centers for teachers and administrators; one operates as part of the district and the other is governed independently.

Boundaries between the private sector and districts are changing. Business communities are becoming more directly involved in leading and supporting school and district restructuring. They are establishing commissions to recommend organizational reforms and providing training and consulting assistance. This contrasts sharply with more traditional “adopt-a-school” relationships.

Deeply entrenched boundaries between labor and management are also changing. Districts and collective bargaining agencies are creating new and less adversarial relationships such as trust agreements, interest-based bargaining, and collaborative partnerships. New roles for teachers under various forms of school-based management require new relationships between teachers and administrators. From teachers and administrators to civil service employees and custodians, traditional labor-management boundaries are being challenged by conflicts between increasing school autonomy and preserving protections for employees.

Boundaries between state government and the larger business community are also shifting. This is visible in the more active policymaking role business is taking in education, usually through task forces appointed by the Governor. Similarly, statewide organizations of parents and community representatives are becoming more active in education policymaking, such as the Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence in Kentucky. There are also more coalitions of community, education, business, and political leaders such as the Governor's Education Management (GEM) Council in Ohio and the Public School Forum of North Carolina. Boundaries among various state agencies are beginning to shift as Governors and others lead efforts to coordinate services for children and their families.

These changing boundaries signal fundamentally different roles and relationships among educators and those inside and outside the education system. **It is these multiple major boundary shifts—and the conflicts they entail—that offer compelling evidence that there is something far greater underway than what is visible in a small number of vanguard schools and districts.**

Shifting Boundaries

BOUNDARY	OLD	NEW
Parents-School	Fundraising	Decisionmaking
Student-Student	Rigid tracking by ability, age	Flexible grouping
Teacher-Teacher	Isolation	Teams
Labor-Management	Adversarial	Collaborative
Business-Education	Adopt-a-school	Policy development, professional training

BARRIERS

Why, with evident progress, is there still such a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of systemic reform? The goal of this study is to explore the barriers to greater progress by looking at some of the schools, districts, and states that have taken the boldest steps and are leaders in one or more areas of education reform.

Barriers to systemic reform take many forms. They may be, among others, psychological (attitudes, fear, lack of know-how), regulatory (federal, state, local board, and union), or physical (size of rooms in school buildings). The goal was not to generate a laundry list but to identify the most pressing barriers and ways to overcome them. This understanding can help adjust expectations for progress based on knowledge of the realities of change inside schools, districts, and states.

Five major categories of barriers confront schools, districts, and states in their mission to transform their organizations, their roles, and their practices. These barriers, among the many identified, are particularly prevalent and significant in the vanguard schools and districts in the study sample.

Lack of clear direction. Educators and students get mixed signals about what matters as new curricula and assessment are layered on top of old.

TO SYSTEMIC REFORM

Weak incentives for change. Incentives for educators and students to change are weak, especially in schools and systems coping with increasingly severe problems of poverty and racial conflict.

Regulatory and compliance mentality. Many existing local, state, and federal regulations, including union contracts, reinforce traditional goals, practices, and measurement, and focus on procedures rather than results.

Limited learning opportunities for educators. There are few meaningful opportunities for teachers and administrators to learn new ways of teaching, organizing schools, and supporting change.

Poor communication. There is little exchange across levels of the education system, within schools, and between schools and their communities.

These are not barriers that can be eliminated overnight. They reflect collisions between the old and the new and will have to be worked out over time. Understanding how they operate in local contexts, however, can contribute to the political support and patience needed for systemwide change to occur.

A discussion of each category of barriers follows. Included in the discussion is at least one illustration of actions vanguard schools and systems are taking to overcome these barriers to reform.



MIXED AND MISSING SIGNALS

Educators in many of the vanguard schools have a shared vision of the kinds of activities that constitute challenging learning environments for all students. Yet they are frustrated by the numerous aspects of the system still in place that do not support—and even conflict with—their attempts to change curriculum and instruction. Even in states with curriculum frameworks and performance assessments, local judgments about individual students and schools are based on standardized test scores and seat time.

Inside most schools, the strongest signals to teachers and students are those that reinforce traditional practice. The signals that communicate new ways of teaching and learning are much weaker. Most states do not have curriculum frameworks that guide new ways of thinking about teaching and learning, and fewer have assessments tied to the frameworks. Even California, the state perhaps furthest along on curriculum, has only just begun to implement its new assessment system and much of it is still being developed. Moreover, the existence of the frameworks does not mean that most teachers have seen them. Districts often have procedures designed to align new curriculum frameworks to current practice, which delays and may weaken their impact.

For example, in one state the process of getting a new curriculum framework from the state to the classroom takes many years as districts go through central office planning, districtwide textbook adoptions associated with the new framework, curriculum committees with teachers, professional development around the framework (when funds are available) and directives to schools on implementation plans. Oftentimes districts cannot even afford to purchase the frameworks. Consequently, several years after a new framework has been developed, teachers and principals may not have seen it.

**"Without a mandate,
all the serious work [on new assessments]
is treated as a pat on the head.
Nice work, but what about those test scores."**

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

For example, new high-level performance goals for students are being introduced in one state at the same time that legislation, passed four years ago, goes into effect requiring a low-level skills-based proficiency test for graduation.

There is a big gap between what written frameworks and goals statements describe and what teachers are expected to do in their classrooms. Teachers feel pressured to continue everything they have been doing because existing policies do not disappear—from requirements for graduation to how students and teachers are evaluated. Teachers are caught between new standards that emphasize depth of understanding over breadth and old policies that lock "covering the material" in place. Deciding what to leave out—and determining how to make those decisions—pose a real challenge. Schools also receive mixed messages when new directives from the state are layered on top of, but do not replace, previous directives.

These issues will have to be resolved over time as standards and assessments are developed and put in place. In the interim, without this guidance, teachers can only turn to the familiar for structure and guidance: defining curriculum by scope and sequence, covering the material in the textbook, handing out worksheets, and giving multiple-choice tests.

Traditional practices are further reinforced because students and parents are familiar and comfortable with them. In the absence of time and opportunities for teachers to learn new content and strategies, the only other resources available to them are through professional affiliations and journals. However, most teachers do not regularly read the professional literature, nor is this activity deemed important by most principals.

As standards and assessments are developed, it is likely this interim period will take several years. For example, the timetable for the state of Washington's new legislation does not put new assessments in place until the 2000-2001 school year. Moreover, the media reinforce a deeply ingrained "horse race" mentality, rather than continuous improvement toward standards. Newspapers rank order schools by test scores—even when the scores are based on assessments tied to standards for performance rather than national norms.

Similarly, school faculties receive contradictory messages when asked, on the one hand, to take risks and learn from mistakes and, on the other hand, to be accountable for results and reassure parents that they are not experimenting with their children. The crux of this issue appears to lie in the appropriateness of the schedule for putting the crucial pieces of assessment and development opportunities in place before triggering high-stakes judgments, such as those leading to school closures or state takeovers of districts.

Educators and the public also receive mixed messages about the goals of reform because there are state or local actions labeled "restructuring" or "systemic reform" that have no visible connection to student learning. For example, state and district approaches to site-based management or site-based budgeting can result in time-consuming obligations for faculty and parents, yet there may be no visible connection to teaching and learning. Often implemented as an end in itself, or within the context of narrowly defined goals, site-based management does not necessarily signal new standards for student performance—or even new authority for schools.

For example, one district decentralized almost the entire budget to its schools to achieve a school board policy that states that "all children can learn at high levels." Then, in the absence of a better idea, the board adopted the learning objectives that accompany the standardized test administered annually by the district.

The absence of powerful signals for new directions does not preclude continual progress. It does mean that there will be a period characterized by conflicting signals and confusion. Change can continue on many other fronts, but significant changes inside classrooms will be slowed until educators and parents are clear about what the new goals for student performance should be, what to let go of, and how to measure progress along the way. Where there is consensus among a majority of faculty, leadership from the principal, and support from parents, progress will be much faster. In these schools, progress is self-reinforcing, with teachers universally expressing amazement at what all students are capable of doing when presented with intellectually demanding tasks. "I didn't know my students could do that" is the most common phrase voiced by teachers who have changed their practices.

A Focus on Student Work

California is developing multiple ways to communicate a shift in expected outcomes for students. The best known are the curriculum frameworks and the newly revised state assessment system. However, education leaders are well aware that hearing about and seeing challenging frameworks and assessments are not the same as understanding and internalizing what they mean.

The state's new approach to Program Quality Review—a school-based review process—is designed to focus the attention of a school's leadership team on student work in one curriculum area with assistance from outside consultants. They conduct a review of their school guided by documents and training from the state that offer rich descriptions of the nature and the quality of experiences and products students should have to meet new performance goals. The review is intended to encourage professional dialogue centered on improved student learning rather than on characteristics of the school. From this inspection, school teams work backwards to determine what they need to change to produce the desired outcomes.

In a similar vein, California's "1274" schools—recipients of state grants to restructure—are creating their own mechanisms for developing a set of holistic outcomes for students, examining student work in light of these outcomes, and sharing and critiquing their mechanisms with partner schools and support people. This too is intended to drive restructuring activities by the quality of student learning.



Harlan Gray Eagle

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WEAK INCENTIVES

FOR CHANGE

Transforming schools and districts is an overwhelming task for which educators, students, and policymakers need inspiration and motivation. Although the rhetoric for change is strong, mixed messages, coupled with increasing nonacademic pressures on school staff and declining resources, detract from putting the rhetoric into practice.

Educators and parents report increasing levels of poverty and violence in the lives of children, circumstances that spill over into the schools. In urban schools and poor rural schools, faculties feel overextended and hopeless in their ability to make a major difference academically in their students' lives. **Teachers and administrators spend considerable time trying to meet the day-to-day basic needs of their students—food, clothing, health, and safety—before they can turn to changes in curriculum and instruction.**

Teachers who have a repertoire of pedagogical approaches are frustrated when they try to apply cutting-edge practices in schools where the same students are not present for enough consecutive days to enable them to work on teams or conduct sustained projects, or where one or two disruptive students can thwart any plan. Others simply do not believe that their students can or want to learn. Moreover, with the rise in immigration teachers face a striking diversity of non-English-speaking students, many of whose language and culture they know nothing about.

Vanguard schools serving children of poverty and of color are able to demonstrate strides in minimizing violence, changing racial attitudes, and increasing access to social services, but these changes are not mirrored in test scores. Moreover, many students do not see a reason to do well in school, given their chaotic home lives and the lack of employment opportunities. In fact, except for college-bound students, there is little incentive to succeed in school.

**"What's disappointing
is that we had all hoped we would see
major differences in student achievement
by the third year and we haven't."**

**It may take a lot longer, and it may not
happen, but [the school] is still full of things
that are better for kids, including
good race relations and no violence."**

ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

Hierarchy of Needs

**"School is the main source of food, of parenting, of love
for many of my students. I have five students who have parents who are
drug abusers. Another whose mother died. One is in jail.
One student saw her mother and boyfriend stabbed. Another is homeless."**

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

This teacher, and her principal, spend considerable time helping students cope with very basic survival needs—finding a place to live, having food to eat, and a safe haven to go to. Like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, until the basic needs of food, shelter, and safety are met, followed by social acceptance, the higher needs for intellectual nourishment are hard to attend to. Confrontations among students and between students and teachers are daily reminders that issues of race, class, and ethnicity are salient and cannot be ignored.

The effects of poverty and racism are cumulative. In the wealthiest schools, educators and students have more time and energy to focus on intellectual development. Moreover, these educators can spend their discretionary time seeking additional resources for their students, while their counterparts in inner cities spend their time getting students to health clinics and other equally overstretched service providers. Suburban students get computers, while inner-city students get inoculations.

The deteriorating condition of school facilities, especially in urban areas, reinforces feelings of helplessness. Policymakers tend to treat the symptoms, requiring self-esteem programs for children of color in schools with no toilet paper or doors on the bathroom stalls.

The notion of hierarchy of needs also applies to teachers. In schools where teachers do not feel safe, they devote considerable energy to protecting themselves and their students from the threat of violence. In schools where teachers have no place to work or relax together, there is little incentive for collaboration.

"You have to have a principal
who will put pressure on recalcitrant teachers,
who makes sure that the ideas
move into action,
that supports and teaches collaboration."

TEACHER

**Integrated Support Services:
Helping the Whole Child**

"When a kid fails, [there] should be an analysis
of why they failed. . . Rarely is it clear cut.
You need to have a lot of players in the room."

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Across the country school districts and social service providers are collaborating to provide access to a range of services for children and their families directly on a school campus. Some collaborations offer referrals for students to other service providers; others provide services on the school site.

Because many students and their families have minimal access to primary care and prevention services, these integrated service centers play a crucial role in supporting students so they can benefit from school. For teachers and administrators, the centers provide much needed professional support. Linking education, health, and social services provides opportunities for professionals to work together in developing curricula that reflect both the developmental and academic needs of children and in ensuring that all of a child's basic needs are met.

The range of support services children need to benefit from academic instruction is large and growing. They include tutoring and other academic support, basic health care, family preservation, gang intervention, drug and alcohol counseling, protective services and foster care, employment services, and crisis intervention.

"We need to convince Governors
that they have to look at social services,
education, health, and welfare together."

URBAN SUPERINTENDENT

The principal is a key source of motivation for faculty, but principals have few opportunities to learn to exert leadership and support for school transformation. Strong principals in inner-city schools spend time getting inoculations and shoes for students, while their counterparts in suburban schools spend their time raising funds in the community for technology and science labs. Those who start with more are in a position to get even more. In one city school, only four of seventy-five children had received their second measles shot because the local health service claimed it could not administer the shots in the school, even after the principal obtained the serum. As a result, the principal spent weeks taking the children to the clinic.

**"More than half of the principals wish and
think this [district restructuring]
will go away. Either they can't do what is
expected or don't want to."**

PRINCIPAL

Financial resources represent another set of incentives and disincentives for change in the context of adequate funding, rewards for high-performing schools, and budget allocations. In theory, the prospect of declining resources is an opportunity and incentive to restructure an organization, but continual major reductions in funding do not serve this purpose. Transforming schools and districts requires everyone to take on extra work—maintaining current practices while planning and implementing new practices. Besides the actual impact on the system, it is

demoralizing when budgets shrink year after year. Budget reductions typically result in less professional development; larger classes; fewer support staff—from counselors to secretaries to custodians; and postponements in building repairs. All of these are crucial supports for change. Moreover, budget cuts suggest to educators a lack of serious commitment to transforming education.

Accountability systems that tie rewards or sanctions to increases in school performance are intended to motivate teachers to improve. In practice, such systems do not appear to motivate changes in teacher behavior for two reasons. First, many teachers doubt that consequences will come to pass, especially rewards in times of budget shortfalls. Second, even in the face of consequences, teachers have limited knowledge of what to do to influence school performance indicators. In this context, the incentives have a distorted influence. In one district, teachers spoke of not testing special education and limited-English-speaking students for fear of lowering their test scores. In another district, teachers spoke of analyzing the formula used to

calculate the school's score, concluding that they were more likely to show improvement by investing their energies in raising the scores of middle-scoring students and ignoring those who scored the lowest.

The way dollars are allocated in most school finance systems does not provide incentives for cost efficiencies. In fact, it is often the opposite. Money saved is money that must be returned to the state or federal government. Similarly, at any level of the system, there is no accountability for whether budgets are met or not. For example, principals receive budget allocations but typically do not have control over many of the expenditures and therefore cannot be held accountable.

"There are no fiscal rewards for saving money; the legislature is the same way."

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

"You would never want to restructure in a time of declining resources. [It is] not true that it wipes the slate clean. It makes the task doubly hard. It creates dissension, low morale. You can't do it without resources to retrain because you want new behaviors; you want people to do things they have not done before."

ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

For educators and students, transforming teaching and learning requires tremendous motivation and effort. The basic needs of students living in poverty, combined with resource constraints, undermine any motivation to take on major school change. Yet there are growing numbers of efforts that tackle basic needs and provide extra supports to students and teachers facing difficult circumstances. In many communities, schools are assuming resource and referral and brokering functions, linking children and their families to a range of services funded by other agencies, such as health care, social services, counseling, and day care. With these supports in place, the intent is to have educators and students and their parents better able to focus on issues of teaching and learning. Additional supports may be forthcoming from federal compensatory dollars if current proposals for concentrating on schools most in need are realized. In a few places where education funding is limited, other agencies—public and private—are stepping in to strengthen these supports.

An Investment Pays Off

Of the 400 African American students who begin Urban High School, only 100 graduate and only 25 of those go on to college. With the help of a coalition between business and city government, the largest middle school, whose students attend Urban High, created a "two-year-in-one" program to help students who are a year behind move from seventh to ninth grade in one year. Through an intensive three-week selection process, including interviews with students and their parents, twenty-four low-performing overage students sign up for an intensive "catch-up" program that requires a commitment to attend regularly, do extra homework, and meet high criteria for performance. The extra resources provide two full-time teachers to work with the students. By the end of the school year, more than two-thirds of the students are ready for ninth grade. A year later they are "back on track" as successful ninth grade students.

"The thought that there are other people to lend support, to find resources, to help ... has moved the school along. It energizes me."

MIDDLE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL



PHOTOGRAPHER Columbia Thomas 11

REGULATORY AND COMPLIANCE MENTALITY

Inside schools and central offices, educators operate according to a vast array of rules and regulations that have accumulated over the years. Some are federal or state in origin, while others derive from local boards or collective bargaining agreements. Often, teachers and principals are unaware of which restrictions come from which level of the system. Some rules and regulations are narrowly interpreted, often traceable to an experience with an auditor many years before. Some are mythical, usually based on misinterpretations or misunderstandings by educators or monitors, while others are the typical distortions of policies as they pass through many people and layers of the system much like the childhood game of "gossip" or "telephone."

Other rules and regulations are clear such as the federal Chapter 1 limitation on the use of Chapter 1-purchased materials by nonparticipants. This leads to such cases as in one school where a set of encyclopedias was locked up, yet visible through glass doors, for most of the year except for a few hours of use by Chapter 1 students. Complaints about regulatory barriers come from administrators as well as from teachers.

"We are asked to reinvent schools,
to break the mold,
and they put a moat of mandates around us.
It's like putting on handcuffs and leg irons
and saying climb Mt. Everest."

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

"[The state] gives us money
but with so many requirements
and no flexibility
that it turns local boards into cashiers."

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

"If you were to list one thing that has dampened enthusiasm more than anything, it was the compliance review because it went against everything the district has been trying to say to schools."

DEPUTY SUPERINTENDENT

"We have prided ourselves on never having an audit finding."

MID-LEVEL MANAGER
STATE DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION

It is not a particular set of identifiable rules that appears to constrain changes in practice the most. Rather, it is a way of thinking about what is possible, based on a mentality shaped by a history of procedural compliance and a lack of experience with other ways of doing business. Compliance reviews—and equally powerful, the threat of one—continue to reinforce this way of thinking. Moreover, such reviews consume enormous amounts of staff time in the central office and in schools as monitors request detailed documentation, often over a period of years, of expenditures, individual student data, and practices.

This ingrained way of thinking is particularly evident in state departments of education where typically more than half the staff is supported by federal dollars. These staff have spent their careers as monitors, ensuring that districts and schools comply with state rules and their interpretations of federal rules. When these agencies attempt to transform from monitoring and auditing to guiding and supporting districts and schools, the whole culture and implicit reward system is undermined. The same is true for some district administrators in charge of categorical programs. Some see their jobs as ensuring compliance and not necessarily making the programs work for students and teachers.

"Part of our dilemma is that staff really want to be more flexible but they are so concerned that they might get a bad audit, they don't want to change."

TOP-LEVEL MANAGER,
STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Because teachers rarely single out a specific state or federal regulation that inhibits them—or when they can, the rule turns out to be fictitious—policymakers mistakenly conclude that regulations do not inhibit major transformations in school practices. This view is reinforced by states and districts that have procedures for requesting waivers. Rarely are such waivers taken advantage of, sometimes because the process is not known or is cumbersome. One middle-school principal characterized the process as: "the half-inch stack of paperwork and three levels of bureaucracy to get a waiver on a credential." Districts and states tend to assume that requesting waivers from federal regulations is a waste of time. They often protect themselves by adopting narrow interpretations of regulations which lead, for example, to teachers believing that pull-out programs are the only model guaranteed to pass an audit.

"If we have waivers or are eligible for them, no one knows or understands them."

TEACHER

Nevertheless, there are a number of areas in which waivers are requested. Interestingly, current requests for waivers are quite similar across different states and over time, based on comparisons with a 1990 National Governors' Association report, *State Actions to Restructure Schools: First Steps*. The kinds of regulations that generate the most waiver requests are those that prescribe time by subject area, who can teach what, total time teachers must spend with students, and required textbooks. Teachers and administrators cite many other regulations as barriers to change but they view them as impossible to waive. For example,

"The waivers from the district tests make me feel free."

TEACHER

certain federal categorical requirements and union contract provisions related to seniority are considered off limits. It is the sum total of the regulations that sets the tone and character of the system: college admissions, teacher credentialing, Carnegie units, length of school year and day and minutes of instruction, funding based on taking attendance (in some states every period), categorical restrictions on eligibility and the use of equipment, seniority, state rules for retaining and promoting students, etc.

The rules and regulations noted above are the more obvious ones in terms directly influencing what teachers do. When district leaders attempt significant restructuring of their central offices, they run into a myriad of less visible rules and regulations that inhibit their ability to make changes, from state civil service requirements to state bidding regulations for contracted work. In one urban district, a top administrator noted how many staffing decisions are determined by average daily attendance. In another district, top officials noted a move away from year-round schools because when school starts in June fewer students show up than in September so in effect the district loses money.

"Another problem is
that so many staff assignments, like number of
assistant principals, counselors, coaches—
are based on formula—
on ADA [average daily attendance]—not on need."

DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR

Conflicting regulations from different levels of the system also cause problems—and even audit exceptions—when they all hit the school level. In one district, schools were found out of compliance when they tried to combine federally mandated parent advisory councils, state-required school site councils, and district site-based decisionmaking councils. Each of the proposed options that would ensure legality for all the programs was burdensome and unsatisfactory to one or more of the groups.

Even more intrusive, but invisible, say district leaders, are the many federal and state mandates that are unfunded or underfunded. Increasingly, these mandates, from latchkey programs to special education, encroach on the regular education budget. Their cumulative effect is significant as more mandates are added, few are subtracted, costs increase from inflation, and more students are identified as needing extra services.

Districts also expend considerable resources in preparing staff for compliance reviews by state or federal agencies, in providing the information requested during the visit, and in correcting perceived deficiencies, both retroactively and in current policies and practices. In one urban district where principals are described as "dying out there with no support," auditors requested from them a list of all the special services each student was receiving. No such list exists. Each special services teacher has a list of students served, but there is no master list of all the services each receives.

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Collective bargaining contracts also place constraints on changing school practices. Policies that regulate how teachers spend their time (and how much time) and the conditions that govern transfers and class size are particularly constraining, though each represents a hard-fought job protection. Yet almost every successfully transforming school has offered teachers the opportunity to opt in or out and given their peers a voice in selecting new teachers. This practice ensures that a new member of a faculty or team is philosophically in tune with the other teachers. Teachers are just beginning to grapple with the implications of traditional centralized bargaining and the need for certain assurances on the one hand, and the desirability of having some flexibility and choice at the school site on the other.

From the state standpoint, it is difficult to let go of procedural requirements without having new assessments in place and accepted.

"I am concerned that unions are driving the wagons and that the interests of teachers, secretaries, and custodians are the constituents, not the kids."

HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

"You have to have outcome measures before you can get rid of procedural review."

SENIOR OFFICIAL,

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Educating All Children for High Performance

Some schools have taken steps to support all children in regular classrooms, totally eliminating pull-out programs for students eligible for compensatory, migrant, bilingual, and special education services. With extra support including small class size and teaching assistants, teachers are able to provide tailored services to a range of students. In fact, they argue, many of the techniques developed for one categorical program are of value for all students. Children no longer feel the stigma of labels, expectations for them are higher, and the "regular" children benefit from exposure to diversity and opportunities to help their peers.

Creating such classrooms is not easy. One reason is the amount of recordkeeping teachers are required to do to be in compliance with the various regulations of each program. They must document minutes spent with each child each day. Another reason is that it requires careful planning and skills in assessing individual progress. Yet, when the resources used to support one or more full-time teachers are spent to support students with special needs in regular classrooms, teachers report astonishing results.

"The integrated classrooms are really working and they are the answer. [They are] good because there are kids to provide good models to other kids IF you can keep classes small."

TEACHER

"The other non-special education kids don't pay any attention—they probably don't even know who the special education kids are. It's amazing what the special education kids learn from being around the others."

TEACHER

There are signs that regulators, monitors, and teachers are beginning to break out of the culture of compliance created by decades of accumulated regulation, monitoring, and fears of monitoring. From the anticipated loosening of restrictions in Chapter 1 of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act to more collaborative arrangements between labor and management, new relationships are being formed based more on trust than on fear.

Even within the existing compliance environment, and despite regulatory barriers, efforts to mold effective practices are possible, although they carry tremendous overhead in paperwork and aggravation. There are more examples of a willingness to shift the burden of proof from teachers to regulators, such as blanket waivers to successful schools in South Carolina and a planned thorough review of all existing legislation in the state of Washington. Contributing to the change in compliance mentality are the efforts of districts and state agencies to form teams across traditional program boundaries with a mission of supporting and assisting schools rather than monitoring procedures.



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LIMITED LEARNING

OPPORTUNITIES FOR EDUCATORS

People throughout the education system—teachers, administrators, and policymakers—are trying to understand the implications of systemic reform on the way they do their jobs. But they face barriers posed both by the contradictory messages described above and by the lack of opportunities for learning new practices.

High performance standards ask teachers to create very different kinds of learning environments than they have created or seen in the past, or have experienced themselves as students. Teachers are familiar with presenting material, following the guides that accompany textbooks, and adhering to district objectives tied to standardized tests. Few have the background or experience to create challenging activities that engage students in understanding concepts and applying knowledge.

"One of the major constraints is that
I don't know of other educational possibilities.
There are things that might exist,
I am not aware of them."

TEACHER

"Teachers largely ask 'How do I do this?'

The assessment and goals say
I have to do something different. How?"

STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROVIDER

**"We keep giving people
more information—
which is not
what they need—
instead of things that get
people into a new way
of behaving."**

STATE DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION STAFF

Complicating the challenge further is the mismatch between what (and how) teachers need to learn and traditional approaches to staff development. The two main strategies states and districts use to provide professional development are to circulate directives that describe new expectations and to offer a menu of professional development workshops. Neither approach is adequate to the task of large numbers of teachers learning to teach in significantly different ways. Teachers in vanguard schools have had a variety of opportunities to observe and study new approaches to curriculum and instruction and to discuss these approaches with colleagues. In addition, they have had sustained help in their classrooms from peers or consultants.

Some teachers need more content knowledge while others need more pedagogical skills. Still others need group process and team building skills and skills on getting along with people who are different. Typically, teachers who already know the most are best able to judge what they need. They are the most likely to be invited to participate in challenging tasks and to take advantage of a range of opportunities. In California, subject matter institutes provide intensive opportunities but are expensive and available to only a few. A few institutes give stipends but these tend to be offered to top-notch teachers.

Teachers describe as especially valuable those opportunities where they can work directly with experienced colleagues on authentic tasks, such as developing curriculum frameworks and curriculum, creating portfolios, and learning to create and score performance assessments. Similarly, when asked where they learn new practices, teachers mention peers in their school as well as those who they find through various networks, from subject-based professional networks to reform coalitions such as the Coalition for Essential Schools or the New Standards Project.

The greatest barrier to learning for teachers is time. Even when time is available, such as days set aside for professional development, it is often unused because substitute teachers are not available or because teachers—and parents—feel that they should be in their classrooms. Vanguard schools inevitably have extra resources that support events such as two-day retreats for the entire faculty, or extra staff to regularly free up time during the workday. As a result, these schools are able to create an organizational culture that supports professional growth.

"Many recent reform efforts have been complicated or stymied because teachers lack the time for planning and professional development that is necessary during times of change. Further, today's calls for more sophisticated teaching and assessment strategies dictate that teachers should have more time for research and individualized time with students.

For schools to genuinely change, teaching will have to become a year-round profession."

PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM OF NORTH CAROLINA, 1992

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"There is no systematic way that we learn, and we expend our intellectual capital."

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICIAL

Those now expected to support and facilitate teachers' professional growth and school transformation find themselves equally unprepared for these new roles. Guiding and helping school faculties create challenging learning environments means that principals, central office and state administrators, and policymakers will have to assume new roles that bear little resemblance to the roles for which they were trained. Yet professional development opportunities for administrators are virtually nonexistent. In some states only a small percentage of administrators can attend leadership academies and many pay for them out of their own pockets.

Principals, particularly under any form of decentralization, have multiple new roles to play. **Principals are expected to be leaders, motivators, and resources for instructional transformation as well as managers, conflict resolvers, and consensus builders.** In fact, as districts decentralize, principals' management functions tend to increase significantly. At the same time, they are sandwiched between pressures from teachers and parents on one side and demands from the district on the other, because many central office staff have not learned to shift from rule generators and enforcers to enablers for schools.

"Unless we are able to reeducate our administrators, I find much of what we do is undone every day at the school sites."

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

"We have paid too little attention to them [administrators]. If they are not what they used to be, what are they?"

STAFF DEVELOPMENT PROVIDER

Similarly, as state education department officials struggle to transform their organizations, they face limited access to any kind of training or professional development. They have little idea what their new roles should be given their traditional role of compliance monitoring. As they turn to helping districts and schools restructure, they discover limited capacity for playing this role. As they take on more responsibilities to help failing schools and even take over failing districts, these weaknesses become all the more salient.

As new teachers enter the system, the need for learning opportunities does not diminish. New teachers are not especially well-prepared for new curriculum and instruction, or for the challenges of urban schools. They are more likely to be familiar with strategies like cooperative learning and whole language but not necessarily with new curriculum content or frameworks. For example, schools of education in California are not necessarily teaching the state curriculum frameworks nor preparing teachers for working with language minority students who now make up one-fifth of the student population.

"We don't know what a restructuring district looks like."

STATE DEPARTMENT
OF EDUCATION MANAGER

"College teaches you how to teach in a suburban school."

TEACHER

"Teachers don't think they are going into a profession that is changing; restructuring schools say they can't find new teachers who think differently."

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION MANAGER

"It's no one's job to think about new ideas."

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER

Funds for professional development—and other assistance and supports for school improvement—are often the first items cut under tight budgets. When funds exist, they are most likely spent on ineffective practices such as one-shot workshops tied to district, state, or university programs, or promotions on the salary scale.

Schools, like teachers within schools, seem to operate in a culture of isolation from one another. Consequently, schools that have made major strides with demonstrable success are likely to be treated as pariahs rather than as sources of experience and expertise. Vanguard schools do establish reputations and host hundreds of visitors. Yet all noted that very few visitors—in one school only two of more than three hundred visitors—were from the same district.

There are few mechanisms for successful teachers and principals to share with each other. As one deputy superintendent noted, the issue is "how we get from islands of excellence to critical mass." Yet it is the teachers and administrators inside vanguard schools who know the most about what it takes to transform teaching and learning.

In central offices and state departments of education, few if any staff have responsibility for learning from successes and helping to disseminate good practices. When they do, their models for "replicating" good practices tend to be limited to traditional written materials and workshops. Nor are there people or financial resources typically dedicated to research and development.

"The district is built
on power
and competition.
My colleagues don't want
me to succeed,
I could end up
becoming an
assistant superintendent."

PRINCIPAL

"Our obligation to our district, union,
and [foundation] is to be very open to
sharing experiences and to trying to transmit
out the lessons we have gained—
like how to go about solving problems,
what are the issues involved—
the trade-offs."

MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHER

"We need to invent new kinds of
professionals who are not
just OD [organizational development] types
with no content or content types
with no organizational change skills."

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION OFFICIAL

Creating an infrastructure that provides current and incoming professionals access to ongoing development opportunities is the backbone of systemic reform. When teachers and administrators have opportunities to learn to do their jobs differently, they are able to create challenging learning experiences for students. To ensure ongoing support and more appropriate professional development, several districts are forming partnerships with local private foundations to establish new entities. In some districts these new organizations are governed jointly, and in others they operate totally independently of the district. Districts are experimenting with ways to share expertise and information across schools, from interactive program fairs that provide opportunities for real exchange of ideas and experiences to the creation of teams of principals who can share new knowledge and provide moral support as their roles change.

Do What I Say or What I Do?

In one school, two teachers were attending different institutions of higher education to obtain their masters' degrees. Both were learning about cooperative learning. In one program, the coursework consisted of readings about cooperative learning and lectures from the professor. In the other, teachers worked in cooperative groups throughout the course. Only the teacher in the "authentic" classroom was able to create cooperative teams in her own classroom after completing the course.



Calvin Stewart

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POOR COMMUNICATION

CHANNELS

Change can be confusing and disconcerting to people, especially when there is little information or understanding about what is going on. Clear lines of communication are therefore critical for minimizing anxiety and conflict in the process of transforming schools and systems. Yet communication channels are poor even in cutting-edge districts. There is little exchange across levels of the education system, within schools, and between schools and the communities they serve. Without clear understanding of the changes taking place, educators and policymakers are finding it increasingly difficult to garner support for what needs to be accomplished.

There are few bridges between the worlds of education policy and education practice. The rhetoric of systemic reform reflects insider policy lingo that parents, local educators, and citizens do not understand. Policymakers do not have mechanisms for hearing from practitioners other than the "squeaky wheels"; they tend to rely on official representatives of professional organizations to hear the collective voice from the field instead of seeking feedback directly from those implementing their policies. Similarly, educators have little understanding of, or appreciation for, the dilemmas faced by policymakers. The result is a lack of trust on both sides about the seriousness of their respective commitments to transforming school systems.

"Change is like moving from
one trapeze to another
and you have to be suspended in
mid-air for a while."

CENTRAL OFFICE ADMINISTRATOR

"Policy needs to grow out of school experience."

ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

Inside schools, teachers work in isolation from one another. Teaching teams and schoolwide decisionmaking councils require new lines of communication. Decisionmakers also must be able to solicit input from others and then feed back information to them. Council members—faculty, parents, and students—value group process training on ways to set up two-way communication between council representatives and their constituencies. School councils also need access to appropriate information—budget figures, curricular developments, data on student assessment and at-risk indicators—from district and state offices that typically have not worked directly with school practitioners in the past. Both central office and site administrators argue that computerized data systems linked to the schools are essential for information to be available as needed. Without easy access to information and the opportunity to consider alternatives, site-based budgeting and decisionmaking become next to impossible.

There are few mechanisms for communication between teachers and parents. In many areas, the level of distrust already is high, especially where issues of racism and discrimination are prevalent. If parents do not understand why experiences for their children are changing, they are unlikely to be partners in the change effort. The more a school moves away from the kinds of traditional practices familiar to parents, the more important communication becomes. Moreover, to increase their understanding of what is going on in their children's schools, parents need opportunities to participate in activities and discussions and not simply to receive information.

For example, in a middle school restructuring into "houses" with an interdisciplinary curriculum, portfolios, performance examinations, and narrative report cards, faculty faced an enormous challenge in explaining their approach to parents. Parents wanted reassurance that their children would really learn the basics and that the narratives on the report card really meant something. Faculty hold interactive training institutes for parents to explain their philosophy and approach. Even though these are well attended, teachers are still seeking better ways to maintain communication with parents.

Educators and parents comment that written documents and booklets sent home with children seldom serve their intended purpose. Often the materials never reach a parent or guardian. When they do, and even if they are translated into several languages, the parent may be unwilling or unable to read the materials. Several schools are moving toward using telephone lines with recorded messages. Parents can call these lines to hear special messages, homework assignments, and other school news.

Communication with parents and the larger community is also an issue at the district level. Where parent groups do not have easy access to information from the district, distrust increases and, correspondingly, support decreases. Superintendents in restructuring districts take extra steps to keep their communities informed. For example, in one urban district the superintendent increased trust by sending copies of the minutes of all cabinet meetings to every parent and community organization.

Communication between schools and their communities goes beyond simply sharing information. The ways in which schools are transforming offers the potential for the school to become more central to its community—as a resource for children and adults.

For example, Kentucky's Education Reform Act incorporates several approaches that bring parents to the school site and actively engage them in new ways. One approach is having parents serve as members on school decision-making councils. On-site preschool programs provide another avenue to include parents in schools. Family Resource Centers, located in schools, coordinate a range of support services that families can access.

Communication is key to redefining relationships between schools and their communities as well as between policymakers and educators. Schools cannot change without the support of parents, and schools cannot survive without the support of the larger community. New institutions and new mechanisms are being created to bridge these communication gaps.

Policymakers are holding town meetings. Superintendents are meeting regularly with parents and community group representatives. Parents are participating in design and decisionmaking teams alongside educators. Across schools, districts, and even nations, telecommunications is opening more doors to information, knowledge, and cross-cultural understanding.

An Information Infrastructure

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence plays a major role in providing information to communities across the state about all aspects of Kentucky's Education Reform Act. It produces a series of reports on different aspects of the law which it disseminates widely. Each report translates legislative and regulatory requirements into clear language with concrete examples. In addition, the Prichard Committee sponsors several research projects tracking progress in implementing the law. Reports on the research are shared throughout the state. The Prichard Committee has a 1-800 line that citizens can call to ask questions and learn more. Its members in communities across the state form local groups to support education reform. Together with the business community through the Partnership for Kentucky School Reform, the Prichard Committee sponsors a comprehensive communications campaign that includes a speakers' bureau, multimedia presentations, and a roving school bus that provides information explaining the components of the state's reform legislation in easy-to-understand language.

Overcoming Barriers: Implications for Policymakers

Expectations for systemic reform are high among policymakers and business leaders. With the passage of time, however, experiences in schools, districts, and state agencies suggest how difficult it will be to meet these expectations.

Creating the policy environment that underlies systemic reform is proving to be more difficult than anticipated. It is easier to add new policies than subtract old ones. It is easier to mandate than enable. It is easier to monitor than assist.

It is taking more time and more support for schools and districts to restructure than expected. Teaching for understanding, managing for results, and leading organizational change are far more difficult than traditional practice.

Even having a systemic policy framework in place is proving to be necessary but not sufficient to ensure that all students are prepared to meet high performance standards. There are issues that go much deeper than education—poverty, race, local political conflicts, and human resistance to change.

This reality makes the role of state leadership and action all the more critical. Governors must continue their role as leaders in education reform. They must continue to promote goals and policies aligned to support high performance and access to resources for all students, schools, and school systems. Governors can use their position to:

Send clear and consistent signals. Encourage review and removal of old policies inconsistent with systemic reform. Keep new policies to a minimum and support only those consistent with education transformation. Be sure there are clear two-way channels of communication among all levels of the system.

Give priority to professional development. Make professional development for educators, and the time it requires, a top priority. Convince policymakers and citizens that it is a crucial underpinning for education transformation. Help redefine professional development as an ongoing part of the job rather than an occasional workshop.

Balance top-down and bottom-up strategies. Balance the need to set and maintain the direction for change and ensure equity while supporting local problemsolving. Discourage reliance on expert solutions, for they will only work if those responsible for translating policy into practice are active participants in their creation. Shift the role of policy from regulating and prescribing to creating conditions that enable local transformation, including flexibility that honors local expertise.

Create feedback mechanisms for policymakers. Invent ways for policymakers to hear from the field and to learn from what is happening inside schools and districts, especially those in high poverty and minority areas. Lead efforts inside states, through interviews and focus groups, that are designed to obtain multiple perspectives from those on the front lines. Avoid sole reliance on official representatives of interest groups.

Make mid-course corrections. Revisit policies as new information is gleaned about their effectiveness and strategies for implementation. Adjust policies and expectations accordingly as lessons are learned from the field.

Focus attention on education as a public good. Focus on the long-term goals. Emphasize the critical role of public schools in our democracy. Create forums that promote ongoing debate and open communication. Shift the context from blame to shared effort so that vocal minorities, individual horror stories, and political infighting do not undermine the goals of reform.

This period of transition between the old and the new presents a major challenge to state and national leaders. Taking systemic reform seriously requires a sustained commitment, a tolerance for chaos, a willingness to acknowledge the real barriers at all levels of the system, and a willingness to change.

Establishing challenging standards for all students does not obviate the need for extra supports for children who suffer the effects of poverty and discrimination. Establishing accountability systems does not eliminate the need for educators to learn new ways of managing and teaching. To the extent that budget limitations slow progress on these fronts, state leaders are in a position to adjust their own expectations and those of their constituencies accordingly.

State education systems, like schools, cannot be transformed overnight. With sustained leadership and attention, however, progress to date suggests that systems can continue to move forward. Although progress is not easy to measure in schools or systems, conflicts around traditional boundaries signal that deep changes are underway.

Governors, together with other state and national leaders, must play an even more critical role now than in the past in keeping education transformation on track. Conflicts will continue to rise to the surface, reflecting genuine differences in access to resources and beliefs about education. **Leadership that focuses the public's energy on the ultimate goals of education and its essential role in preserving our democracy will be the critical underpinning to continued improvement.**

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ABOUT THE PHOTOGRAPHS

The photographs in this report are from SHOOTING BACK, a Washington, D.C., Education and Media Center that conducts photography workshops for at-risk youth. More than 600 youths have participated in the program since its founding in 1989 by Pulitzer Prize winning photographer Jim Hubbard.